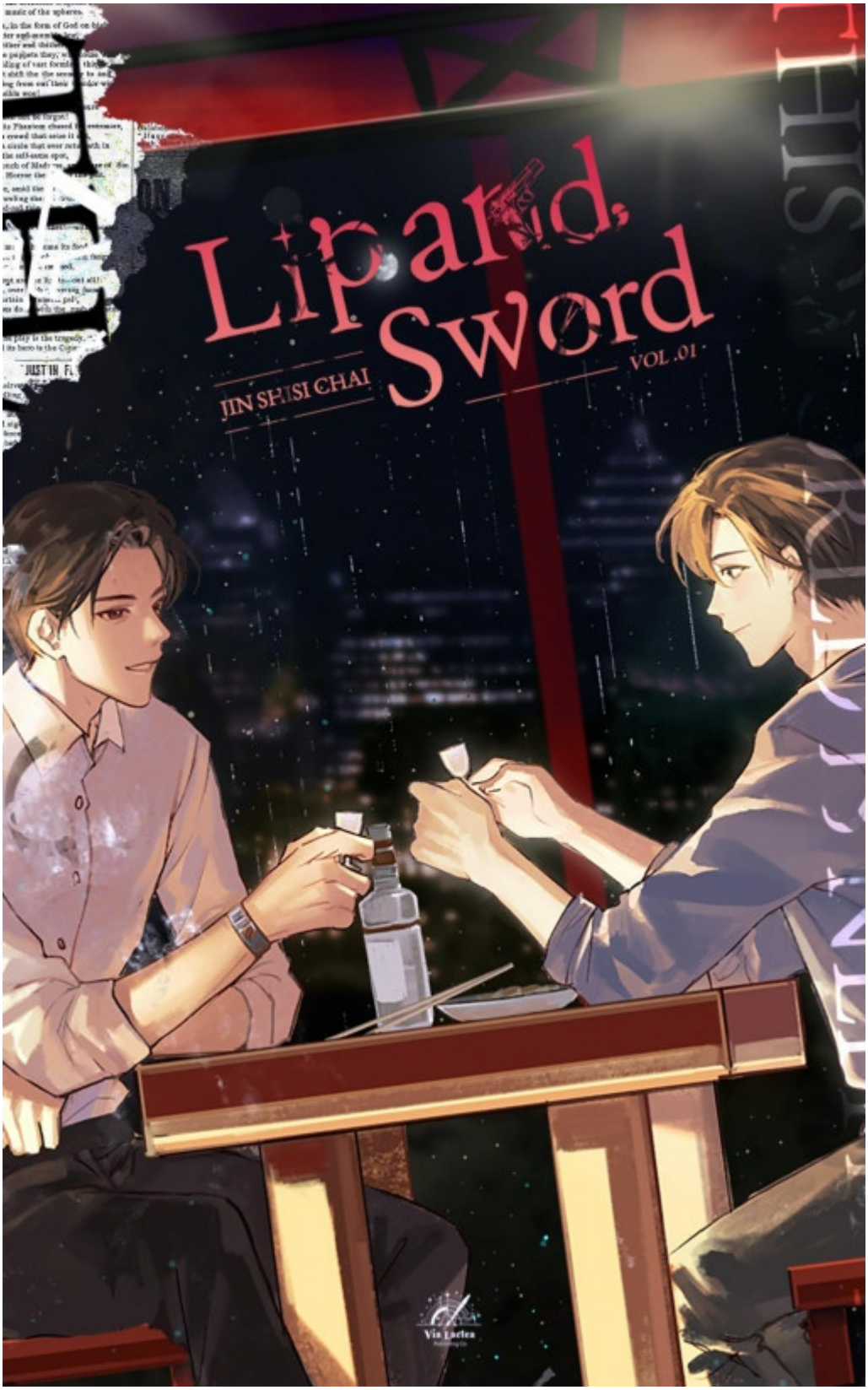
Lipard, Sword
JIN SHISI CHAI
VOL .01
Via Lactea

Lip and Sword

唇枪Vol.01

JIN SHISI CHAI / 金十四钗

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Book Title: Lip and Sword 唇枪

Author: Jin Shisi Chai 金十四钗

Translator: Queenie; Erin

Proofreading: Mercury

Editor: Michaela M

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SYNOPSIS

In order to find out the truth about his father's wrongful death in prison, med school graduate Xing Ming resolutely entered the news industry. With his dedication and commitment to pursuing journalism, he becomes a popular news anchor, known sometimes as an "Ice Prince." To clear his father's name and bring justice to his case, Xing Ming went so far as to sacrifice himself, clinging to influential and powerful people.

He hates Yu Zhongye's selfishness and indifference but has to accept his advice and help again and again. With Yu Zhongye's guidance, Xing Ming eventually grows into a professional journalist while also managing to keep the bottom line of reporting with integrity. As his show goes on, his life gradually unwinds, and the truth about his father's wrongful conviction gradually emerges…

But when he opened that final door, waiting for him was…

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Chapter 1

Farewell, Farewell

Xing Ming struck Chen Linan during the year-end conference banquet of Pearl TV Station News Center.

The News Director of Pearl Station, known more commonly as Ol' Chen, was in charge of two of the most notable programs at the Station. He was a man who always loved sticking his nose into other people's business during work or in their personal lives. Far more than that, as a master of flattery and kissing up, Ol' Chen had the most vile, vindictive, and vengeful personality at the Station.

Tales of their conflict at the year-end party quickly spread like wildfire around the News Center. The rumors were widely discussed and described the incident like a bloody crime scene. Almost everyone seemed to believe that Xing Ming was in serious trouble this time. Given the authority of Ol' Chen, no one except the chairman, Yu Zhongye, would dare to go against his will at the Station. Clearly, this time, Xing Ming was the instigator who had made the first move by smashing a wine bottle into the director's head.

But to be honest, Ol' Chen had actually been Xing Ming's talent scout. Like the historical horse expert, Bole, had always known how to pick out good thoroughbreds, Ol' Chen had been the one to pick out Xing Ming. Without him, this brilliant young man wouldn't have had the chance to stand out from others and become such a great success at Pearl Station.

Based on a core tenet of "Seek the truth," Pearl Station strove to provide its audience with distinct news programs and content, just as it had ever since its initial establishment. After years of working in the traditional media format of television and radio broadcasting, the Station was now confronting the challenge caused by the friction between traditional and online digital media. In recent years in China, the fast-growing pan-entertainment industry had brought huge changes to televised media with its multi-platform franchises that spawned many different types of media products from the same intellectual property. As such, it had become Pearl Station's top priority to transform their television programs to adapt to the changing times.

It was worth mentioning that two of its popular shows had become household names. One of them was *Pearl Line*, a news analysis program. After being launched, it had gained a positive reputation within the industry, readily winning numerous television news awards at both the provincial and national levels. The other program, *Fated to be with You*, was a dating show. Its male guest presenter was eloquent and adept in storytelling, and its multi-talented female presenter was capable of singing and dancing. On top of that, due to their exaggerated acting and their sensationalism, the show quickly went viral and gained popularity, beating its rivals after airing.

Both television programs were quite remarkable within the media industry: one had established the Station's reputation while the other gained steady profits. As such, Pearl Station became the main target of ill will, animosity, and grievances

from many envious rival TV stations. Why should Pearl Station have both fame and fortune?

To find suitable guests for *Fated to be with You*, the dating show had collaborated with a few renowned dating agencies where several veteran marriage matchmakers and dating scouts worked. They frequently wandered around places like department store boutiques and exclusive clubs. Just like eager hawks hunting to snatch rabbits as prey, they stealthily spied on their targets with shifty little eyes, looking solely for pretty faces regardless of anything else.

The story of Xing Ming's brand-new career had started on the day when a scout had settled on him at first glance on a bustling street.

Xing Ming was a born and bred Southern Chinese man, but, strangely, he had a face that looked like a Northerner. His fair skin, thin lips, high-bridged nose, and height (more than six feet) made him stand out wherever he went.

The dating scout had gone straight for Xing Ming, offering him a chance to join the show immediately after obtaining his personal information.

Coincidentally, at that time, Xing Ming had been shopping with his girlfriend, who was a die-hard fan of the dating show *Fated to be with You*. Even after being forced to watch the show by the girlfriend a few times, Xing Ming still took it as a stupid and ludicrous performance.

In his eyes, the show ran like this:

A bunch of amateur struggling models, longing to stand out in their workplace and get into the entertainment circle would get together on stage and perform hilarious skits built upon the miseries of their families and friends. They then tried to gain sympathy from the audience by rambling on about their clichéd love stories and their gut-wrenching past experiences. In the end, the curtain would fall on an exaggerated performance as the actors wrung crocodile tears out of their eyes due to their "deep sorrow" and spouted out insincere promises.

What a perfectly contrived show!

The clowns on stage cried and sobbed; the audience off stage burst constantly into laughter. It was like a melodramatic comedic skit.

With a degree in Clinical Medicine from college, Xing Ming had held no interest in performing or acting in front of a crowd. In truth, he had been more of an expert at dealing with dead people, rather than the living. But his girlfriend had wanted the opportunity to get on camera, and the matchmaker had always kept his wits about him. He'd known when to take advantage of the opportunity and immediately took action, quickly offering a "buy-one-get-one-free deal" to them, allowing both of them to join the program, so long as they passed the interview process.

After a round of interviews, his girlfriend had been unfortunately rejected by the picky director in the final round. Meanwhile, Xing Ming had made it through easily and eventually got to the live recording process.

What could’ve been worse than this?

Chapter 2

Voice of the Public

However it is that the voice of the public speaks, so must be mirrored by the rule of state.

This motto was gifted to news media workers at large by a famous industry leader. Its sentiment was rational yet touching, but, to Xing Ming, media workers were in truth a very arrogant group of people.

Xing Ming's view towards people within this circle was quite pessimistic, but he had confidence in his team. Back when he had plotted to replace Zhuang Lei's team, he had carefully picked out a team for himself. Within the group, a lot of people were those he'd personally found and promoted. Their six-month team relationship wasn't long, but people would have to say that, despite his excessive strictness, Xing Ming deserved to be regarded as a good leader most of the time. He did not greedily pursue success and merit and was not stingy on giving bonuses to his team. On the occasions when *Pearl Line* had received awards, the humble host, Xing Ming, had shared his success with his coworkers.

As a result, all the team members got a piece of the pie, it was mutually beneficial. One of Xing Ming's most virtuous and heroic moments had taken place during an interview in Manila, when a mobster had attacked. During the attack, a mobster with a knife had decided to aim for the program director. Xing Ming had noticed that the program director had frozen during the emergency and shoved him away, getting stabbed by the mobster's knife in the process.

When he was stabbed, Xing Ming had covered his severely bleeding wound and acted very calm and composed. The program director on the other hand had cried and wept like he wanted to offer his own life in sacrifice to save Xing Ming.

Staying up all night together and risking their lives together, like soldiers who had used the same latrine and crouched in the same trench: the so-called camaraderie of revolution was nothing more and nothing less than that.

This was why he had been so confident when he said to Yu Zhongye that he could find his own team members and crew for the show.

But Xing Ming also had a flaw. He got too into his work, so egocentrically engrossed in his work to the point where he often had trouble remembering the names of his underlings, addressing them instead by their job title. The editor was "Editor," and the program director was "Program Director." He personally thought this was a very efficient way of doing things, but in reality, this was just him being lazy.

Xing Ming had ordered Ruan Ning to attend to arranging the weekend dinner with the whole team pretty early on. He planned to strengthen his connections with his team and help promote their sense of cohesion, while conveniently bringing up the opportunity of the new program.

Chapter 3

Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining

When Xing Ming woke up, it was already 1 PM. Usually, he would get up at 6 AM no matter what had occurred the night before, taking his morning run and morning shower, eating breakfast, then listening to CNN news… The disturbance in his biological clock that resulted in such lateness and unpunctuality was partly attributed to his excessive drunkenness last night, and partly because of Yu Zhongye—Xing Ming was nearly twenty years younger than Yu Zhongye, yet he hadn't gained even a sliver of victory in the battle between body and body. With a soreness in his waist and an ache in his legs, Xing Ming stayed in bed for a while before he completely woke up. His vision was still a little bit blurry, but fortunately, he hadn't gone blind. He walked naked to the bathroom and faced the mirror above the sink. At first, he was astonished, standing stock still for a few seconds and growing a strong dislike for the man reflected in the mirror, disheveled and dirty, without any propriety whatsoever.

Xing Ming found brand-new toiletries and took a shower. His clothes had already been taken away, so he had to put on one of Yu Zhongye's shirts. Though it was one size too large, his six-foot frame fit it well enough.

Getting over his negative emotions and burying them deeply in his mind, he rearranged himself, walked out of the bedroom, and stepped down the stairs.

Yu Zhongye was already there, and, hearing someone approach, he looked up to glance at Xing Ming. "Come and sit."

Xing Ming obediently sat on the seat next to Yu Zhongye and faced a table full of mild and refreshing dishes. Lowering his head, he began wolfing down the food. Though his stomach was still uncomfortable, he was starving.

Yu Zhongye had a long habit of eating until only 70% full, so he'd already stopped eating by that point. He observed Xing Ming for a while. Then, in a sudden motion, lifted his hand to pinch his chin—only, Xing Ming reflexively leveled his hand to block, and the two wrists collided with a loud bang. In such plain daylight, Xing Ming felt a bone-deep unwillingness to be so intimate with other people.

Meeting the gaze of a pair of deep eyes, Xing Ming finally realized who the "other people" had been and immediately regretted his actions. Sincerely, he called out, "*Laoshi*."

"You don't look so good." Yu Zhongye didn't seem mad. "You should take some time off."

Coming from the instigator of the situation, it was a novel concept that metaphorically dripped with crocodile tears. Xing Ming instinctively refused, "It's Monday, I have to be at the Station…"

"I won't let you rest in vain," Yu Zhongye interrupted, pushing to Xing Ming the stack of documents that had been lying on the table. "Take a look."

Chapter 4

You Are the Only One

Xing Ming had lied to Yu Zhongye. He did not go home to accompany his mother. Instead, he went back to his rental apartment.

Since then, a normal week had passed as usual. He got up at six, took a morning run, took a shower, ate breakfast, and listened to CNN News… Then he went to Pearl Station. The only deviation from routine was that his team had officially entered the separation phase. The technical director, camera operator and post-production team had almost all accepted offers of job transfer and were preparing to move to their new workplaces. Xing Ming sat in his own office, watching them holding their organized file boxes through transparent glass doors as one left, then another…

Only Ruan Ning stayed in the formerly full working area. The one who didn't want to stay had to stay, while the ones who wanted to leave had all left.

The last one was Sun Wei. He walked into Xing Ming's office, asking, "Do you need me to stay one more month before transferring and handing over the work?"

"There's no need." Xing Ming's stare penetrated through the glass-door past Sun Wei to see Ol' Chen approaching. He smiled as if nothing had happened, telling Sun Wei, "Work hard on your job and take good care of your family."

Ol' Chen had come at a time that was later than Xing Ming had expected. He pretended that he had waited for the other man's arrival for a long time. As soon as Ol' Chen arrived, he stood up to welcome him.

"Hey, young Xing!" Ol' Chen came in, face lit with a smile. He seemed to be initiating a peace-talk. "I've heard from Yu-*shu* that you were sick, why didn't you take a few more days off to rest?"

"All thanks to the heartfelt care of Director Chen, I haven't died yet." With the same smile on his face, Xing Ming stared straight at Ol' Chen. He didn't seem to be rattled by flattery or insulted, bravely confronting all the tough breaks and setbacks with poise in light of a brighter future.

Outside the transparent glass doors of the office, a crowd had gathered. While they pretended to do work or converse, they were really just attracted by the potential gossip, wanting to see if another big fight will start up between the two inside.

"Isn't it your birthday soon? Why hasn't Yu-*shu* said anything about celebrating it?" On the surface, Ol' Chen looked amiable, but in reality, the man hated Xing Ming so much that he was almost gnashing his teeth. He had planned everything thoroughly and meticulously, yet this one oversight had still happened. He would never have thought that such an arrogant Ice Prince would so shamelessly climb into Chairman Yu's bed.

Chapter 5

Recklessly Being Myself

Creating a strategy plan for investment attraction seemed to Xing Ming like it would be a piece of cake. It was always easy to talk theoretically, yet much harder to take measures based on those theoretical strategies. From the start, he had made promises in front of Yu Zhongye to take full responsibility for the plan. The jobs that were originally meant to be headed by the Advertisement Department had now been taken on personally by him, the host.

Investment attraction through advertisements had historically always been a horrible chore. Moreover, it did not match with Xing Ming's high-handed way of doing things. Since his networking resources would soon be gone, even if the strategy plan for investment attraction was flawless and even if he became his most submissive and modest, it didn't work well. The responses had been polite though their latent message was clear—nowadays, who still watched the news?

Investment attraction had high ties to the production budget for the show and the future of the group of team members. As such, Xing Ming didn't dare to neglect it, nor could he get discouraged enough to give up. For several continuous days, as soon as he got home, he searched thoroughly for business cards in every trunk and box he owned. After a full search, he found out that he knew people from all trades, but not anyone powerful enough to make the final big decision. He could only blame himself for the lack of networking in his daily life, and now, when he needed these people the most, it was too late for him to find anyone. He had only remembered to dig a well once he started to feel his thirst.

Only one business card seemed to be a relative fit. Xing Ming stared at the strange name on the business card and after drawing a blank in his mind, he flipped to the backside. Seeing the main project's company name, he finally recalled who this person was.

He was a rich playboy whose family had a business that sold adult diapers. Although it sounded vulgar, the business had been widely successful. Once in a while, TV shows were filled with their business' advertisements. They were so popular that their brand recognition rivalled even certain famous French cosmetic brands. Whenever people heard the slogan, "You deserve to have it," they would automatically follow up with, "Worry-free and comfortable. Don't let wetness bother you."

Xing Ming knew him from when they'd been in an episode of *Fated to be with You* together. The man had been a paid actor invited onto *Fated to be with You* and he had been assigned as Xing Ming's competitor in the script. During the show, both men had crazily chased after an enchanting airline stewardess, but in reality, Xing Ming's competitor was gay.

Ironically enough, on the show the airline stewardess gave up money for love and chose Xing Ming; but outside the show, she tried extremely hard to get with the rich guy, crying and weeping for a date. The airline stewardess had Xing Ming's number as well, but she never called him once. Maybe it was because she was more

sophisticated, having gotten used to the many hardships of societal life and thus knowing that there was no fucking use in a man with just a pretty face. His handsomeness wasn't worth a single penny.

However, to everyone's surprise, the rich fellow didn't give even a one-word response to this stewardess and instead repeatedly invited Xing Ming out for drinks and a soccer game.

Although the rich dude wasn't very handsome, he had been born tall with friendly and kind features which gave the impression that he was a talented and good-looking teen. Because of that and the fact that Xing Ming had already intended to work at Pearl Station, he had thought that making friends with such a rich guy wouldn't hurt. It wasn't until after he had gone to that club that he realized that something was wrong.

Under the lights and in the open, men were deeply kissing each other, creating viscous and moist noises. On his way in, all the people who approached him were of the same sex; tall and short, fat and thin body shapes, they varied and differed in innumerable succession. The rich playboy got rid of the other flies hovering around Xing Ming. As he talked more with him, the man gradually put his hands onto Xing Ming's thighs, intending straight up to slide them toward his crotch. Xing Ming saw the pair of triangular eyes glittering under the spotlight, and smelled a foul stench, a mix of fish, musk, and urine; like the smell of a male dog lusting after a bitch in heat.

The rich dandy's emotions were so poignant and his desire so urgent that only an idiot wouldn't figure out his ulterior intentions.

At the halfway point, Xing Ming found an excuse to go to the restroom and snuck out the back door without returning.

He then called his girlfriend who had been quarrelling with him for a breakup and finished the argument by having break-up sex with her in a hotel near the bar. After sex, his girlfriend felt satisfied, and Xing Ming was relieved: Good, he didn't become bent.

Two months ago, Xing Ming had once again met that rich playboy on the street. By the way his triangular eyes had clung to Xing Ming, like a stray dog chasing meat, sniffing around his body, it had been clear that he had been still interested in him. Honestly Xing Ming knew that if he could humble himself and mediate the situation with flattery in just the right way, he might have been lucky enough that he wouldn't even need to have sex with the playboy to accomplish his goal. But firstly, he was disgusted by the idea and secondly, he wasn't willing to have his new, personally established program associated with the name of adult diapers via sponsorship.

Xing Ming stared at that business card with hesitation. He continued to hesitate until he walked into Pearl Station's office, whereupon he finally made up his mind and threw that card into the trash can. Instead, he turned to call his family. Xiang Yong, who had started his restaurant business many years ago, possessed some skills and social connections. Xing Ming had originally expected to be able to rely on him to reach out to some of the people he knew, but unexpectedly Xiang Yong

had met with some troubles recently. His biological son, Xiang Xiaobo, had been sent to jail again for inciting trouble in a crowded, public space.

Xing Ming didn't want to make the situation harder for his stepfather, so after promising to attend a make-up reunion dinner with the family as soon as he got off work—one that he had delayed for so long—he hung up the phone.

Outside the working area, banging sounds resounded noisily all morning.

Xing Ming called Ruan Ning into his office, asking, "What's happening?"

"They're changing the advertisement lightbox." Ruan Ning continued, "Right now, all the posters, display boards, and advertisement lightboxes at Pearl Station are being changed to the commercial advertisements of Luo You and his show *If People Love Beauty.* Ol' Chen seems to be very proud and pleased about it. Ol' Sun from the East Asian Channel is going crazy. The East Asian TV Station spent five years creating a perfect host with good-looks and skills, but then he got stolen by our TV station. I heard that it was all because of Ol' Chen…"

The name "Luo You" sounded so piercing to Xing Ming at that moment that he just didn't want to hear it. It had nothing to do with the man's high-profile participation at Pearl Station with his peacock-like behavior, showing off and attracting all eyes. It was the fact that if Luo You hadn't invited those two paid-actors to his program and exaggerated the story, the incident with the paid-actors would definitely not have turned out like it had now.

Xing Ming frowned slightly. He contemplated, then stood up to say, "Let's go and take a look."

Just opposite the working area, a poster of Luo You had replaced the original poster of Xing Ming and *Pearl Line*. A group of female staff members gathered around the advertisement lightbox, gossiping, "So handsome! Luo You is really handsome!"

To be honest, the man really was good looking, with fair skin, charm, and just the right amount of joviality. It was completely different from the aloof presence of Xing Ming. Xing Ming stared at the advertisement lightbox that was right at eye level. He frowned without speaking.

Ruan Ning was chatty as usual, "They're all saying that the number one handsome guy in Pearl Station has changed."

Xing Ming was preoccupied. "Who's supposed to be the original one?"

"Of course, it was you, Boss." Fearing that Xing Ming would be upset, Ruan Ning immediately added, "They're just too excited over the newness. Boss, you're clearly more handsome."

The praise was quite pleasant, but Xing Ming didn't enjoy it at all. He still asked with a mildly discontented face, "Now that Luo You is the host of *If People Love Beauty*, then he should be at the Entertainment Center. Why is it that even at the News Center all the ads are for him?"

Chapter 6

Ten Thousand Horses Standing Silent

For several days, whenever Xing Ming encountered Ol' Lin, he would always stare at his wrist unconsciously. His dad's Longines watch wasn't on Ol' Lin's wrist, but he just couldn't control himself. The stare from his eyes were like blades and he often threw glances towards Ol' Lin, one glare after another. Moreover, such stares couldn't be concealed from others. Ruan Ning even ran up to ask him, "Boss, did Ol' Lin borrow money from you and not return it?"

The encounter in the morning wasn't enough. Even at night Xing Ming would dream about him, as if he was bewitched with nightmares. In his dream, he pulled out a sharp knife and stabbed Ol' Lin full of holes. The blood dripped and dribbled, and evaporating from his fingertips in clouds.

Xing Ming desperately hated Ol' Lin, but he hated himself more. The good news was Ol' Lin didn't break his promise in the end. Yu Zhongye's assistant one day suddenly informed him that he had to go back, pack his bags, and prepare for a business trip with the chairman.

Xiang Yong knew that Xing Ming would attend an especially high-class event, so he immediately mailed him a special high-class present—a Hermès belt.

In recent years, the restaurant industry hadn't been doing too well, and Xiang Yong's restaurant was struggling a little. If it were before, he could have sent a whole set of Hermès products.

Xing Ming remembered certain moments from when he was in middle school. Xiang Yong used to pat him on the shoulders and brag pridefully to everyone else, "This is my son." Later, as Xing Ming grew taller and taller, and Xiang Yong shrunk more and more, he would need to stretch his arms so far to touch Xing Ming's shoulders. But his words had never changed.

"This is my son."

The sharp contrast between the small, dark-skinned form of Xiang Yong and the fair skinned, tall and handsome appearance of Xing Ming always made the other people giggle and snicker.

It was because of himself, a mere stepchild, that Xiang Yong's biological son, Xiang Xiaobo, always had trouble getting along with his father. Xing Ming had felt guilty over this for years.

People from Sheng-Yu had sent a private plane to pick them up, and, on the way to the villa, Ol' Lin picked up Xing Ming as well.

Yu Zhongye looked Xing Ming up and down and stretched his hands to grab Xing Ming's waist, bringing him closer. He unbuckled Xing Ming's belt buckle and stripped off his Hermès belt.

Chapter 7

Never Growing Up

It was almost noon the next day when Xing Ming opened up his eyes to the glimmering and glistening sunshine. Then he saw that *Ten Thousand Horses Standing Silent* painting.

That painting was facing the hotel's bed, where Yu Zhongye no longer remained. Xing Ming, annoyed that he had slept through his biological clock again, stood up and went to the bathroom to take a cold shower. He had to admit that he'd had a great and comfortable sleep last night. Sitting in Yu Zhongye's arms and shuddering, it had felt as if, every time he just about achieved orgasm, he was instead repeatedly flung to higher peaks of pleasure.

As the mint-scented body wash rubbed into his back, a burning pain erupted. Xing Ming took another mirror to look at his back, then cursed: *Fuck*.

That shrewd old fox had been so savage. Xing Ming's back was covered in wounds of various shapes and patterns. The pale flesh contrasted with the crimson whip marks, making it look exceptionally horrifying and wretched.

After the shower, Xing Ming wrapped himself in a bath towel and walked out of the bathroom. He went back to the front of that painting *Ten Thousand Horses Standing Silent*.

There was no signature on the painting, but it kept a verse from the poem "Ten Thousand Horses Standing Silent," from the Qing Dynasty. The characters were masterfully written. They showed domineering power with their distinct edges and curves. Xing Ming wasn't short-sighted, but he couldn't resist leaning in for a good look, his face up close, slightly squinting his eyes to scrutinize those verses of poetry… The more he looked at it, the more he got a strange feeling; the more he checked it, the more familiar it seemed. Then, he suddenly turned back toward the desk—the calligraphy that Yu Zhongye was practicing last night still remained on the desk.

It had the same power and edges, the same structure and delicacy. Only, the way Chairman Yu held a calligraphy brush to write now was more skilled and controlled. It compromised between savageness and elegance, between the freedom of releasing vigor while also reserving it.

Xing Ming discreetly looked at the calligraphy Yu Zhongye practiced last night. In the beginning, it was still composed and neat; but the farther along it was written, the bolder the strokes became. It had gotten to the point where characters had become almost unrecognizable. By the time it reached the last stroke for the proper finishing touch, characters had been so coarsely written that the brush had penetrated right through the Xuan paper.

Nonetheless, without a doubt, that painting *Ten Thousand Horses Standing Silent* should be one of Yu Zhongye's early works.

Chapter 8

Enchanted

Xing Ming opened up his eyes to the sounds of a rainstorm and his first reaction was relief that he didn't feel like vomiting since he hadn't consumed mixed alcohols. He remembered that last time when he had been confronted at the car and washed with the "water gun" used by Ol' Lin. It was a memory unbearable to look back on.

Hangover headaches were inevitable. Xing Ming sank his whole face into a basin filled with cold water and resolutely held his breath. He washed his face a little and looked around the room where he had slept last night and noticed the décor, which was strangely youthful and vigorous. It was not Yu Zhongye's bedroom.

The owner of this room seemed to be a shoe collector. Such a huge room with such huge shoe racks. There were limited edition versions of Adidas and Nike running shoes, collected and put next to various prizes and trophies. The running shoes were almost brand new, and the awards were diverse. Xing Ming guessed this must be the bedroom of Yu Zhongye's son, Yu Shao'ai.

Every corner of the room showed how little its youthful occupant knew of suffering or sorrow.

Yu Shao'ai only occasionally came back home to stay for a short time. The American-raised youth paid particular attention to his privacy, so Phoebe only did cursory cleaning, without sorting or arranging anything and placing all cleaned objects back in their original location. Xing Ming perused the pages of a photo album left on the table, which held pretty old material. The content was mainly family photos of a beautiful woman with a little boy or photos of this boy alone. Each group photo was marked with words in a twisting script, with sentences like "I love mommy." The beautiful woman was the mother, Hong Ni, and the little boy was the son, Yu Shao'ai. However, from start to finish, the figure of Yu Zhongye, the father, did not make a single appearance, nor were there any mentions of him. Xing Ming perceived that this pair of father and son might not have a close relationship.

The last photo had been taken at a high school's graduation ceremony, where that little boy had already grown to almost the stature of an adult. He appeared in frame together with a group of white boys. Standing straight, he was tall and handsome, as confident as his companions. At a glance, it was easy to see that he'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. With a straight-bridged nose and a small face with fringed-up hair, he looked untamed and rebellious, but from his eyes alone, it was clear that he was someone who rarely attracted others' ire.

The facial features of Yu Shao'ai were more like his mother's, but that pair of eyes took after Yu Zhongye almost exactly: charming, deep, and enduring. Xing Ming couldn't help but secretly praise that pair of eyes. Although that cunning old fox had bad ethics and set aside talent for sexual favors, his inherent genes were still impeccable.

Chapter 9

An Old Enemy

It was a brand-new week when Xing Ming got up early, dressed himself up appropriately in a business professional suit, and then, bright and neat, drove his car to Pearl Station.

Although Pearl Station Garden was big, its parking spaces were few. While the staff members with less experience had to park their own cars outside the Garden, hosts like Xing Ming in well-known channels and programs had their own exclusive parking spaces. Despite the fact that he'd almost been kicked out of the Station some days before, such a spot was still reserved for him.

After greeting the security guard in the parking lot, Xing Ming reduced his speed and drove slowly and carefully, preparing to park his car. Then, unexpectedly, a red Ferrari took over the parking place which originally belonged to him.

The Ferrari was an extremely flashy car. Since Xing Ming had first taken the job, he had rarely seen those types of luxury vehicles at the Station. Pearl Station had a lot of wealthy individuals, especially those hosts at the Entertainment Center, who had constant income from side gigs. So it wasn't that employees couldn't afford luxury vehicles, but more that it was against workplace customs to drive those cars into Pearl Station Garden.

Some things were simply too flamboyant, and the implied extravagance often became the target of criticism. The people at the Station were all knew better than to make such a blunder.

Xing Ming drove a white BMW 320 that he had paid for on an installment plan. No special reason, just that he liked German cars, and that he had a reputation to keep up.

His usual spot taken, Xing Ming backed out of the parking lot to park outside the Garden.

He spent some time dealing with this, so when he got to the office, he arrived later than his usual time. Upon arrival, he found that the staff members in his team were all packing up their things. Xing Ming frowned and asking them what happened.

Ruan Ning ran towards him and told him that early in the morning the News Center had notified them they had to move, since the area on this whole floor now belonged to the new host.

"The new host? Who?" Xing Ming already had a name in mind.

"Luo You. He's in the chairman's office right now. Ol' Chen said to send you over too when you arrived."

Standing in front of the door of the Chairman's office, he did not enter. The door

was half-open so he could hear the conversation in the room. First came the voice of Ol' Chen: "Yu-*shu*, I just saw Ol' Lin going to pick up the car, but I didn't recognize it. Did you change your car?"

Yu Zhongye hummed noncommittally. Then, without answering or continuing the conversation with Ol' Chen, he turned to the other person. "How's the old man been recently?"

"Grandpa is healthy, and he always talks about you. He said that among all the rivals who've played Weiqi with him for all these years, you're the only one who dares to beat him." It was the voice of a young man, speaking in a very standard Mandarin accent. His tones and cadence were neither heavy nor light and very pleasant to the ear.

Yu Zhongye's laugh was bright and candid. "I'll invite that old man to play soon. We'll play by the same old rules, he gets two moves of handicap—no cheating."

"Sounds good." The young man laughed as well. "I'll tell my grandfather later, and I'll come keep you company. After retirement, he's just been practicing calligraphy and writing books all day. Too much spare time."

Ol' Chen hadn't been able to join the conversation at all, as such, in the office, only those two men were left talking with each other about their daily life of their families. Xing Ming stood at the door, not coming in despite his boredom.

That was only until Yu Zhongye's voice rose: "You've waited outside long enough. Come in."

Xing Ming pushed open the door and looked past the two men whom he had already knew, resting it on the new face—

His eyes suddenly brightened. Pearl Station's chairman's office was definitely not a shabby place, however, this man with the new face was indeed glamourous, almost sparklingly bright.

Luo You, seeing Xing Ming coming in, actively stood up, and greeted him with a joke: "Isn't this Xing Ming, who's even more charming than movie stars? It's an honor to meet you."

The man was pretty tall; previously, just from seeing him on camera, it had been hard to tell he was so tall. Xing Ming only felt that with such a charming and delicate face, the other man should not have taken another advantage with his height. He looked at Luo You, nearly at his eye level, with no expression or courtesy. "That Ferrari in the parking lot is yours?"

Luo You, seeming to take on an air of generosity, stretched out a hand towards Xing Ming. "In the past, we just worked for our own companies, but from now on we will have to work together. How about just letting go of all our past grudges?"

In a display of friendliness, Luo You, with certain degree of patience, kept his hand outstretched with a smile. However, Xing Ming just glared at him with his chilling eyes, motionless. It took about a minute before he reacted. In front of

Chairman Yu and Director Chen, instead of shaking that hand, he only slapped Luo You's hand with a loud clap, saying, "Nice to meet you."

Not waiting for Xing Ming to sit down, Ol' Chen briefly informed him of the office relocation matter, and then began praising and complimenting Luo You, practically gushing about him. He said that, originally, he'd been worried about whether or not Luo You would need time to adjust, since he was a newcomer to the Station. Unexpectedly though, when they did the trial broadcast for the first episode of *News China*, he showed he was good at memorization, with great flexibility and adaptability. Although the short news stories were full of hard-to-pronounce jargon, Luo You could read them without making mistakes. He also coordinated well with directors, even those he had never worked with before, and, from start to end, didn't need to look at the teleprompter…

"Those are all just basic skills. Anyone who studied this major should be able to do it. I'm not the only one," Luo You said modestly, then continued, "As a student, I had dreamed about Pearl Station. *News China* had the highest ratings, and *Pearl Line* had the widest influence. They are the best shows in China."

Ol' Chen interrupted, "Isn't it the time to announce that young Luo is in charge of *News China*?"

Xing Ming unconsciously curled up the corner of his mouth disdainfully. Ol' Chen's was making such a big fuss over such a small thing. Being a news host was the most boring job in the entirety of Pearl Station. It was job of word-by-word reading. Who couldn't do it?

Yu Zhongye seemed to notice Xing Ming's reaction, so instead of answering Ol' Chen, he turned to tell him, "I've watched the sample clip of *Oriental TV Line*."

Ever since Chairman Yu expressed favorable opinions of Xing Ming, Ol' Chen had not tried to intentionally embarrass him again. Even the head editorial office was working as efficiently as usual and had only taken half a day to approve the chosen topic even though Xing Ming had stayed for the "Nights of Sheng-Yu" and had only been instructing his team remotely. In addition to Su Qinghua's supervision, the team members had finally managed to finish a sample clip for the program on the topic of AIDS with extra working time and effort. It wasn't even an exaggeration to say that special effects, captions, and background music were all near-perfect, more than enough to be taken as the final version.

The experienced experts in the review room had thought it was acceptable after reviewing it, and then turned it in to Ol' Chen. Ol' Chen, who absolutely dared not cause any more discontent, directly copied it to Yu Zhongye.

Since he had an appointment with Mayor Wang later, Yu Zhongye let Ol' Chen and Luo You leave first, which only left Xing Ming. Then Yu Zhongye asked him, "What's your opinion on the host candidates for *News China*?"

Xing Ming replied, "I would recommend a fair competition. For instance, by taking one month as the deadline, two candidates could take rotating roles as hosts, and then let the audience vote for their best choice. The mutual competition between two top hosts wouldn't necessarily be harmful since they'll have audience

encouragement and could stimulate each other to success. Stagnant water would not be a good thing."

Xing Ming may have talked pretty words, but in reality, he had his own ulterior motives. Luo You seemed quite dangerous, and he had possibly wicked intentions. He wanted Luo You and Lin Siquan to compete with each other and not influence his *Oriental TV Line*.

"Then we'll do as you say." Yu Zhongye stood up and walked out from his office desk, coming around toward Xing Ming's side. "On the whole, the sample clip was great, though the opening and ending still need some improvements. But you just came back, how did you do so much?"

"People can't be lazy. Not to mention, I'm not as good as everyone else. The slow need to start early." Xing Ming didn't intend to complain, but against his expectations, grievances had slipped from his mouth. But then he thought his words over again, and he found them sounding less resentful and more like playful whining.

"You sound angry." Yu Zhongye tenderly caressed Xing Ming's face. Noticing the temperature of Xing Ming's forehead, he lifted his chin. "Are you feeling wronged?"

Xing Ming looked into Yu Zhongye's eyes but became troubled by his stare. The weeping face of Lin Siquan would not leave his mind. The nature of the trade was supposed to be mutual profit. *When I granted you pleasure, you should never have sought anything that you were not due, nor thought anything that should have been forbidden. For example: love.*

How sad. How pathetic

While Xing Ming was still absent-minded, Yu Zhongye had already unbuttoned his perfectly buttoned shirt, exposing the wound which had originally been slightly hidden. He covered it with his pair of lips, gently sucking at that mark of lust. Then he held the back of Xing Ming's head while his lips traced across Xing Ming's ears, cheeks, the bridge of the nose, then his chin with tenderness and care. Without missing a spot, his lips finally settled on Xing Ming's lips.

Yu Zhongye's tongue pried open the two closed rows of Xing Ming's teeth and slipped into the warm, wet depths of his mouth, licking and teasing his teeth and palate. At first, Xing Ming kept his eyes wide open, warding him off with an uncooperative tongue. However, his resistance lasted less than five seconds before he closed his eyes, tamed.

His resistance had been instinctual, but his obedience was sincere; he really liked this kiss.

"Take care of yourself. When you feel better, there are still a lot of jobs awaiting your diligence." Yu Zhongye smiled and wiped with his thumb at the saliva lingering on Xing Ming's lips. Then, after teasingly tweaking Xing Ming's lips, he turned and left.

Chapter 10

Accompanying a Sovereign is Like Accompanying a Tiger

After spending the whole night studying exercises for the mathematical modeling competition, when he saw Cui Haofei the second time, Xing Ming seemed much more confident. With the younger man, he earnestly discussed the topic of "improvement and revolution of retirement insurance for government officials." Xing Ming did not mention anything about inviting him to be on the show, neither did Cui Haofei take initiative to openly accept the invitation. However, the two did share some kind of mutual understanding; birds of a feather flocked together, and most smart people often preferred conversing with other smart people

Right before Xing Ming left, Cui Haofei suddenly said, "You're actually gay too, right?"

With no consideration, Xing Ming's denial was immediate: "No, I'm not."

"You're not? Are you serious?" Cui Haofei squinted at him with skepticism written all over his face. "Take a look at your legs. They're so shapely, but they can't close tightly. And your ass too, it doesn't look like a straight guy's."

Xing Ming self-consciously lowered his head to check.

"Just kidding." Cui Haofei on the hospital bed laughed uproariously, waving his hand while saying, "I'll see you tomorrow."

However, when Xing Ming knocked on the door of Cui Haofei's care unit for the third time, the kid's attitude had unexpectedly completely reversed. He pressed the call bell at his bedside, yelling for Xing Ming to get out.

After leaving the hospital, Xing Ming was not in a good mood. Returning to the office and listening to Ruan Ning's report, he knew that the chosen topic that he submitted had not been approved. The head editorial office still persisted in their opinion that the new program had to follow two words: "safe" and "appropriate."

Xing Ming promptly turned to leave; he evidently had to debate this with the head editors.

The lead editor of the head editorial office was named Wang Bozhou. People used to call him "Madman Wang," but later he was more often called Editor Wang. Editor Wang had graduated as a Philosophy major from Peking University, and he seemed to have some of the mannerisms of those old-school intellectuals. He had eyeglasses like the bottoms of beer bottles, and he was bald. He didn't talk or smile much, and he was scrupulously meticulous, but rumors had it that he'd been extraordinarily capable when he was young. In the 1980s, he'd taken a camera with him to the frontline, going alone deep into the hinterlands of Afghanistan. It was said that he fought together with the local anti-Soviet forces against the Soviet tanks, using those Lee-Enfield rifle that the locals favored. The photos that he had brought back home were even more precious than the ones taken by the Associated Press.

Chapter 11

I am Xing Ming

As soon as Xing Ming got off the plane, he caught a taxi. After two-hours of a rough and bumpy drive, he hurried directly to the Hongxing Moving Company, a provider of loading and unloading services, in order to catch Cui Wenjun while he was working. However, one of his colleagues informed Xing Ming that he had arrived too late; Ol' Cui had already left on a service trip and he would only come back a week later.

Oriental TV Line had settled its schedule to do a live broadcast from the beginning, but the short video clip during the show was crucial. It definitely could not be filmed live at the studio. After calculating the time, Xing Ming figured that it was too late to wait for Cui Wenjun to come back, so he decided to find a local film post-production studio to write the script, shoot, and produce the video right on the spot. He would do the finishing touches and final cuts for the video after getting back to Pearl Station.

Before leaving Hong Xing Moving Company, the colleague from earlier quietly approached Xing Ming, telling him that he was also a man with stories. Xing Ming smiled, generously handing him a cigarette and sharing his contact information.

Confused, Ruan Ning, asked, "Boss, how can you be so casual? You're someone important!"

Xing Ming hadn't been feeling well for a while now. He was too busy preparing for the TV show to care about other things. Ignoring Ruan Ning's chatter, he took some fever reducers out of his pocket. Then, popping out two pills, he threw them back, chewed directly and swallowed them dry. Witnessing this, Ruan Ning was astounded. As the saying goes, one could not judge a book by its cover. The "Ice Prince" appeared both relentless and arrogant, but actually he was innately carefree and nonchalant. He cared about his work more than himself.

Xing Ming had Ruan Ning rent a passenger-carrying van so that during day they could trace the local crowd and secretly film and record interviews at illegal psychological health clinics. At night however, they all lived at a cheap motel on the street corner, which, not even mentioning the lack of star ratings, wasn't even comparable to a 7 Days Inn. Program production fees were hard to gain, so to use the good steel for the blade of the sword, they had to use their money wisely.

Taking unauthorized film recordings during the interviews took them several days. In the hotel room, Xing Ming sorted and reviewed all their video footage. Though they had shot a lot of source material, little was useful, which meant that they had gained little from their interviews.

Around seven at night, he was in time to watch *News China*. Tonight, the host on duty was Luo You, who was interacting with the on-site reporter during the show.

Without a doubt, Luo You was the only host that possessed a notoriety similar to that of an idol among the other hosts at Pearl Station. If he'd worked in the

entertainment circle, he definitely would have been a great success. Normally a person with such a flamboyant charming appearance would actually be unsuitable for such a righteous and positive news program. But Luo You wasn't only able to act loftily but was also able to ground himself with calm and humility. Xing Ming examined Luo You's performance with a critical eye, but he found this person was intrinsically meticulous with a fine image, a thick, pleasant voice, and composed professionalism.

Xing Ming and Ruan Ning shared a hotel room, so he asked Ruan Ning, "What have people been saying online?"

Browsing the internet on his cell phone, Ruan Ning answered, "The audience voting started yesterday and so far, the votes are 20% to 80%. The comments are similar to the numbers as well. Although some of them feel sorry for Host Lin, the majority still supports the idea that *News China* should change to the host with a new face."

"Isn't this a month-long vote? It's impossible yet to tell which hunter will kill the deer." Though he said so, Xing Ming secretly worried for Lin Siquan, whose future career did not look promising.

"Hey Boss, did you know?" Ruan Ning put down his phone and turned his head to Xing Ming, "Three years ago, Luo You wanted to join Pearl Station. He even arrogantly claimed that he wanted to be the host of *Pearl Line*. But as it turned out, even though the *News Center* approved it, Yu-*shu* didn't give permission. He told him to stay at East Asian Station and keep practicing."

On the screen, Luo You was calm, knowledgeable, and confident. His hosting skills already seemed to have been perfected.

"Where did you hear that gossip?" Xing Ming looked up to watch the TV screen and thought that everything made sense. The reason why this young man tried to mess with him all the time was because he had an existing grudge. Xing Ming had been occupying the place that Luo You had wanted, and he felt that Xing Ming was the cuckoo bird who'd pushed him out of the nest.

But Xing Ming still didn't understand why this young fellow had not seized Zhuang Lei's *Pearl Line* but instead started with Lin Siquan's *News China*. Then he recalled Luo You's eyes when he was staring at Yu Zhongye. Xing Ming suddenly found the answer in his mind.

This was Ruan Ning's first time going on a business trip. As such, he was so excited that he didn't sleep until two or three in the morning, chatting the entire time. Xing Ming, however, was even more excited than him. Though they stayed in the same room for most of this time, Ruan Ning had not seen Xing Ming at all since he always seemed to have locked himself in the bathroom to phone Su Qinghua. Perhaps he didn't want to bother Ruan Ning.

During the call, Su Qinghua reminded Xing Ming that he should not waste time. If *Oriental TV Line* postponed even one episode, then he would no longer have a place in the news circle.

Chapter 12

Life and Death Disclaimer

Yu Zhongye did not finish watching the entire live broadcast of the first episode of *Oriental TV Line*. After the show had run ten minutes, by the time the scene on the secret investigation appeared on the LED screen, he had left the studio.

The part which could be played in public had, of course, been edited and repeatedly revised throughout the post-production process. In the final version of the video, the scenes which needed be hidden were masked and the parts that needed to be cut were erased. However, despite this, people who knew Xing Ming well could immediately tell that this particularly bold and daring journalist was the host of *Oriental TV Line*. When the video recording was first reviewed, Yu Zhongye had his secretary take the original footage of the secret investigation from the News Reviewing Department and he had watched it.

The sky seemed to be sloping, smooth and richly lustrous like a piece of silk. Along the street were stores lit up with lights that filtered like sparks through the trees' leaves, like splendid and dazzling silver blooms. In the unceasing stream of cars, the black Bentley sometimes proceeded forward while sometimes pausing to stop. Ol' Lin was holding the steering wheel and stared intently ahead.

Yu Zhongye was sitting on the back seat and had closed his eyes for a little nap. He seemed slightly worn out since he had just gotten off the airplane in the morning after spending three days in Los Angeles, talking business with the big shots in the animation industry and also visiting his son. The negotiation had been temporarily stalled and the kid's channel on Pearl Station still needed improvements.

"For me, since I've got a good social network at Pearl Station, there are many people that are willing to tell me a lot of things." Ol' Lin had his own lounge in Pearl Station, so when he wasn't on business for the chairman, he would walk around the Station. People at the Station also wanted to chat with him and tried to ingratiate themselves to him through flattery. "For today's *Oriental TV Line*, wasn't young Luo originally intending to save the show?"

"Luo You is a talented young man. Beside his professionality, he is considerate, careful, and pays attention to the overall situation. He hasn't wasted his time practicing in East Asian Station and has definitely improved and matured." To gain approval and praise from Chairman Yu was not easy. The two TV shows had two different, distinctive styles, yet Luo You could handle both of them skillfully and easily. In *News Chin*a, he was solemn and stylish with ample sociability, while in *If People Love the Beauty*, he did not upstage all attention in the TV show, yet he was still attractive and would even sometimes improvise the script. His ability to flexibly adapt and come up with comic dialogue on special occasions was definitely amongst the top in the industry.

"How about letting young Luo help in contacting that animation company in the U.S.? Young Luo has a family background with connections to all those industries. Last time, because of that extremely popular guy… didn't that British singer put his first newly released live show in mainland China on our station?"

i Quan-ge and Lei-jie refer to Lin Siquan and Zhuang Lei respectively. They denote “older brother” and “older sister,” but they are used in familiarity with friends and friendly acquaintances regardless of familial relation.

ii This means “teacher,” which is a respectful yet familiar way to address someone reg*ardless of age or gender*. In context, this initially seems somewhat inappropriate, but the backstory behind it is explained later in the story.

iii The suffix “-shu” denotes “uncle,” but it is used in familiarity for older men regardless of familial relations.

iv Three hundred thousand (300 000) Chinese Yuan is about forty-seven thousand (47 000) US Dollars

v This quotes the final couple refrains of the Italian folk song “Santa Lucia.” The lyrics are translated from the Chinese of the original novel and are not the same as the original Italian nor any of the English translation.

vi This term of address means “master” in the sense of master-and-apprentice.

vii The full saying is roughly “refused a toast of wine only to drink in forfeit.” The meaning behind it is that if someone does not agree to a request, they could be forced into the task anyway.

viii The original Chinese name, *Wan Ma Qi Yin*, means “10000 horses simultaneously mute/silenced.” Historically, it has symbolized a public that dares not speak. Nowadays, it also describes oppressive political situations.

ix Xing Ming’s given name, “Ming,” is the verb used for birdsong or birdcall. It is opposite in meaning yet parallel in form to “Yin,” the character in the title of the painting that means “mute” or “silent.”

x The actual term used was “cheap son,” which is a way to refer to someone who acts like one’s child but is not blood related, often used for stepchildren or adoptive children in a derogatory way.